

Innocence, Seduction, Ruin in PANDORA'S BOX and PRETTY POISON

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By Julia Lesage

PANDORA'S BOX (DIE BUCHSE DER PANDORA) 1928 Germany 110 min. Nero-Film. Dir.: G.W. Pabst, Screenplay: G.W. Pabst, Ladislaus Vajda (based on the plays *Erdgeist* and *Buchse der Pandora* by Frank Wedekind), Cinematography: Gunther Krampf. CAST: Louise Brooks (Lulu), Fritz Kortner (Dr. Peter Schoen), Franz Lederer (Alwa Schoen), Carl Goetz (Schigolch), Kram-Raschig (Rodrigo Quast), Alice Roberts (Countess Anna Geschwitz), Gustav Diessl (Jack the Ripper)

PRETTY POISON 1968 USA 89 min. Twentieth Century-Fox. Dir: Noel Black, Screenplay: Lorenzo Semple Jr. (based on the novel *She Let Him Continue*, by Stephen Geller). CAST: Anthony Perkins (Dennis), Tuesday Weld (Sue Ann), Beverly Garland (Mrs. Stepanek), John Randolph (Azenauer), Dick O'Neill (Bud Munsch)

Theda Bara as the Vamp never seduced her audiences, nor did Mae West. Paradoxically, the characters these women played were not innocent enough to give female sexual "evil" real allure. The most desirable film seductresses evince sincerity, childlikeness or youthful ingenuousness as well as sexual availability. Because Greta Garbo and Ingrid Bergman exuded wholesomeness and athletic fitness as well as "mature" attitudes toward sexual freedom, they functioned more as public sex objects than any obviously evil film seductress ever has. To calibrate the precise mix of sincerity and sensuality that makes an actress the most desirable, the sexiest, and the most devastating is to analyze how entertainment films embody male fantasies about sex.

Common cultural lore prescribes a sexual double standard and, correspondingly, a division between good and bad women. (The former are often filmed as blonde, small-town girls and the latter as brunette, city-jezebels in their thirties or forties.) Cross-culturally and historically, women have been associated with anarchy, the night, destructiveness, fecundity, the sea, chaos, and the unclean. They are this in their very being. Men, in opposition, are the doers-the artificers, lawmakers and bearers of culture. Men are the heroes of stories and the protagonists of written history.

Once primitive cultures arrived at an understanding of paternity, the passing of woman from family to husband had to be accompanied by a pledge of women's purity. Girls' sexual innocence and wives' fidelity have for centuries buttressed patriarchy, letting a man's sense of possession include his wife and children. Neither the girl nor the good woman were acknowledged as having sexual drives and rights outside of a hierarchical system of social control, enforced through marriage; and it was often too threatening to recognize their sexuality at all.

Looking at centuries of literature, art, and, more recently, at film will show what male-dominated culture projects as desirable and fearful about women and sex.

Entertainment film, in particular, conveys two messages about sex. First, archtypically represented by the adulterous love myth of Tristan and Isolde, is the conviction, "It's got to be bad to be good."

The literary tradition of passionate sexual love depicts it as adulterous, outside society, and doomed. Marriage kills passion, and such love destroys men, who are lured into passionate alliances at the cost of their social status, integrity, or strength. The passionate relationship is always destructive, either with the man seducing and abandoning virtuous women or with the evil woman destroying men.

At the same time that literary and screen seduction depends on the lure of the forbidden, anarchic, and romantic desire to plunge headlong into the sensual moment, cinematic depictions of total decadence--the Babylonian sections in *INTOLERANCE*, the lowlife in *PANDORA'S BOX*, the wild parties in many flapper-era films--offer audiences only caricatures of sensuality and opaque emblems of social decay with which no viewer gets emotionally involved. The actresses do not make hearts throb, nor do they function as great film symbols of the seductress' destructive power. To seduce viewers as well as men on the screen, femme fatales such as Elizabeth Taylor and Marlene Dietrich have to convey their characters' helplessness, basic goodness, sacrifice, or generosity, while they give off an aura of selfishness and reckless abandon (or they evince a self-sufficiency totally beyond male determined roles, which is, I think, the source of Dietrich's lesbian appeal).

Thus, the second lesson that cinematic depictions of the seductive woman convey is that female sex appeal is tied to a woman's goodness. Garbo always has a heart of gold and never loses her halo light. Sometimes, as with Garbo, the seductress convinces us of her basic goodness; sometimes only the hapless male character falls for the heartless girl's "innocence"--as in *PRETTY POISON* and *LOLITA*. Or, within the film itself, the woman's admirers may be divided into two camps--those who see only the woman's sexual persona and are seduced and destroyed, and those who see her real self and may or may not be seduced and destroyed. This division of male admirers into knowing and gullible camps is found in films as diverse as *BUTTERFIELD 8*, *THE BAREFOOT CONTESSA* and *PANDORA'S BOX*.

In any case, all films that draw us into a plot of seduction and ruin depend on establishing a real or feigned goodness in the woman's character. For us, this goodness makes the evil more shocking or alluring. Internal to the story, it allows the male to be lured into and given over to badness; and badness, within male-defined culture, characterizes the female's willful expression of passion and sex. From *The Bible* and *The Orestia* to current attacks on abortion and welfare rights, woman's uncontrolled sexuality has been portrayed as evil and in need of man's control. *CARRIE* and *THREE WOMEN* show the same fear of women that *The Bible* shows of Eve. DePalma and Altman express an archetypal fear of women's sexuality, suspicious even of girls; and it is no coincidence that the film version of *THE EXORCIST* gained a certain mythic power by changing the devil's victim to a girl.

In PRETTY POISON and PANDORA'S BOX, not only is woman's sexual drive shown as capriciously destructive, but also woman's sexuality is made into a metaphor for that which would destroy the social order. The films' titles each establish a metaphor for social destruction; and in each film, lines of dialog make that metaphor explicit.

In PRETTY POISON, red, the color of passion, is associated with Tuesday Weld as Sue Ann, and with chemical pollution. To establish the necessary contrast of "goodness" here, the camera constantly lingers on Weld's hair; her head is often shown in close-up, in three-quarter view, with an emphasis on silky blondness, the emblem of female goodness. Furthermore, the ultimate crime of matricide is staged ironically against a very feminine, wholesome, and intimate decor, excessive in its floral design. In fact, the metaphor of Sue Ann as poison is so overstated and corny that only a great cinematic wit, by finding new ways (angles, juxtapositions, framing) to state this comparison, gives this film its Hollywood-style elegance and grace. PRETTY POISON devolves less on Weld's acting, except in the murder sequence, to "explain" the innocent looking destroyer than it does on all the connotative associations in which Weld's performance is embedded.

PANDORA'S BOX also depicts the social decadence to which excesses of passion and male sacrifice can lead. Yet, as Lulu, Louise Brooks plays a more complex and sympathetic character than Weld does in PRETTY POISON. In terms of complexity and attractiveness, Lulu is clearly of more interest to us than are any of the men who want her. Brooks' gestures convey a multiplicity of emotions. Although she is the locus of destruction, Lulu cannot simply be labeled bad. Even at the end, before she is killed, her figure glows and is placed in a mise-en-scene that connotes her capacity for true sexual generosity, if not love.

If we look only at Brooks' performance as Lulu in the film and the way this figure is dressed, made up, lit, and framed, we can evaluate the desirable mixture of good and bad necessary to a screen seductress. Lulu elicits admiration or sympathy as well as reprobation. For example, in the backstage sequence of Lulu's opening night, Lulu refuses to go on stage because her rich lover and patron Schoen has brought his upperclass fiancee to the performance. Brooks executes Lulu's temper tantrum both as a violent outburst of real frustration and rage and as a manipulative sexual tactic. The seductress is making her move, but it is clearly the only gambit she has in a sexual-political and class-biased game that leaves the mistress the loser.

Before the above sequence, Pabst had the genius to reveal explicitly the patriarchal emotional and economic structure in which the game of seduction and ruin is classically played out. Alwa, Schoen's son, and Schoen both want Lulu. After quarreling (Alwa is warned not to bring Lulu into the house again), father and son are filmed in a scene of reconciliation and sharing. Behind them, in Schoen's study, hangs a Delacroix painting of violent conquest. Schoen suggests that Alwa put Lulu in his play and Schoen will give her backing through his newspapers. Schoen touches his son tenderly and gives advice about "those women."

Both men seem highly satisfied that Schoen has found a way of both paying off Lulu, distracting her from his forthcoming marriage, and keeping her under the two men's benevolent, acquisitive control. Lulu's histrionics seem an appropriate response when she sees the other, socially more powerful woman on her turf. And, although Lulu seemingly wins this round in the sexual and class battle (she effectively forces Schoen to marry her), this sequence and the way Brooks acts it also convey an undercurrent of desperation. If we confine ourselves to looking only at the figure of Lulu, the film's stance toward her is largely sympathetic.

At the same time, the main theme of *PANDORA'S BOX*, like that of *PRETTY POISON*, is that woman's willful sexuality leads men to destruction. In *PANDORA'S BOX*, scenes of social order give way to scenes of chaos, poverty, homosexuality, drunkenness, gambling, murder, grotesquery, and total selfishness. For example, the theatrical milieu is depicted as a world of sexual transgression and grotesque figures; on the opening night, these figures are composed in swirling, unsettling compositions, often forcibly separating Schoen, both physically and metaphorically, from his fiancee. As the film begins, Lulu intimately welcomes the tramp, Schigolch; and throughout the film she maintains a sexual, emotionally capricious, and

morally irresponsible relation with this father-figure and lower-class consort. The persistence of this relation, even if it is in the background, is important to Lulu's characterization, in that it stands as a reminder of Lulu's past and future, and also as an indication or marker of truly decadent sex.

The sexual woman is always bad. Love outside the social order, in the "pits," leads not only to the predictable destruction of the burgher and his son in *PANDORA'S BOX*; but also it is associated with lesbianism, voyeurism, the sale of women, and bloodlust. The minor characters, the lesbian designer Geschwitz and Jack the Ripper, are the underworld doubles of Lulu and Alwa. The women have a final moment of generosity and die for it; the men succumb to the ultimate evil in their souls yet can be saved. In *PRETTY POISON*, the female protagonist Sue Ann has only the guise of innocence; at the end, her evil might be unmasked. Yet even there, the male protagonist Dennis ends up with moral integrity in spite of ruin. From behind bars, he seeks refuge from that prison which these two films assume women's unleashed sexuality to be.

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